M.E.Sharpe

The Ever Entangling Web: A Study of Ideologies and Discourses in Advertising to Women

Steven M. Kates and Glenda Shaw-Garlock

The authors combine discursive textual analysis and the findings from long interviews to understand and theorize about the ideological representations of women in a specific discursive field of advertising: ads in women's magazines. They synthesize findings of previous research with their findings to propose revisions to the current communication model of advertising, explicitly incorporating historical perspective of meaning(s) construction.

Steven M. Kates, C.A. (Ph.D., York University, Toronto, Canada) is a Lecturer at Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Queensland, Australia.

Glenda Shaw-Garlock is an Undergraduate Student at the University of Northern British Columbia, Canada.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

(Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass)

Advertising as Representation

Representation involves the connection between things in the phenomenal world, concepts, and signs (Hall 1997). A magazine advertisement consisting of a two-dimensional image combined with text from which we can derive a particular meaning is the very essence of representation. Through culture, we learn that a photograph signifies something that exists in the real world, an abstract concept, or an imaginary thing. We can decode an ad by using cues found in representative systems of language such as physical gestures, clothing, set, lighting, tropes, and text. The meanings derived can be as simple as the identification of an object such as a toothbrush or chair or as abstract as the notion of the good life or love.

Ad interpretation is part of a larger system called "the circuit of culture" (Hall 1997). Indeed, to discuss representation requires that it be placed in the context of conventions and linguistic tropes that help us make sense of our social worlds (see Thompson and Haytko 1997). We represent something when we desire to share or express some idea, feeling, or concept that we carry in our heads. Loosely speaking, individuals are said to belong to the same culture when they interpret the world in a broadly similar way and can express thoughts and feelings in such a way as to be understood. Culture also includes the organization and *regulation* of social practices, and it influences conduct by setting out the rules, norms, and conventions of social order (Foucault 1980). Over time, ideological *codes* tend to fix and naturalize the relationships between conceptual maps and language systems and enable members of a culture to communicate effectively. The system of representation thus becomes a stable cultural convention that is taught and learned by members of a society. As a result, the preferred meaning (Hall 1980) of a cultural text such as an ad may "be this, but not the other."

We argue that despite recent important revisions to the traditional advertising communication model (Lasswell 1948; Stern 1994), it is still deficient,

for it does not explicitly incorporate the critical dimensions of discourses and conventions that influence consumers' decoding processes (Stern 1994, p. 9). Examining the current model, we make two specific criticisms. First, the consumer is presumed to interpret the ad as text seemingly in the absence of representational codes and, conventions implying textual determinism. Second, the model does not incorporate the notion that texts invite *multiple* readings, and consumers are likely to forge their own negotiated meanings, albeit influenced by broad sociocultural viewpoints (see Byars 1991; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Overall, we explore the nature and importance of discourses in mediating ad interpretation; further, we propose revisions to the model, placing ad interpretation within broader social and historical contexts. Thus, we contend that cultural studies (Hall 1980, 1982; Turner 1996)—a diverse body of thought that has extensively addressed issues circumscribing ideology, discourse, representation, and interpretation—can make a contribution to our discipline.

As Humpty Dumpty's presumption suggests (see Hall 1997; Mick 1986), language is not a neutral medium (Stern 1996a). It may be described as social practice: "our private intended meanings, however personal to us, have to enter into the rules, codes and conventions of language to be shared and understood... neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language..." (Hall 1997, p. 25). We explicitly acknowledge the discursive aspects of ads as representation (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1970, 1980; Hall 1997) and draw upon British and American branches of cultural studies, which in turn have been influenced by poststructuralism (Foucault 1970, 1977, 1980; Hall 1997).

The Importance of Historical and Ideological Context: An Illustrative Discursive Analysis of the Ad Representations of the "Lone Woman"

An accepted criticism is that advertising is an important and pervasive cultural institution that represents women in a problematic and unacceptable way (Bordo 1993; Douglas 1994; Ferguson, Kreshel, and Tinkham 1990; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Richins 1991; Stern 1993; Wolf 1991). Further, it is not particularly radical to argue that certain ads have co-opted feminist themes in order to market to women. For illustration, we provide a sample discursive analysis of an ad by referring to the Evian ad in the Appendix. It portrays a woman *alone* in the frame, poten-

tially suggesting themes of autonomy, arguably important to the feminist movement. The woman is not shown leaning on a man or surrounded by other women, depictions which might imply that she requires the company of others to legitimate her identity (see Stern 1993). The ad is good exemplar of many found in women's magazines such as *Vogue, Self, Elle*, and *Mademoiselle*.

What is the origin of the "lone woman" field of discourse? Traditionally, women have been positioned within discourse as relegated to the home (Ehrenreich and English 1979; Thompson 1996). Yet during the last few decades, feminist critique of the domestic role has entered mainstream social discourse. As women have crossed the boundary from the domestic sphere to the professional arena, expectations and representations of women have changed as well. Further, in some discourses, the stereotypic character traits attributed to women have shifted from weak and dependent to strong and autonomous. The market for women's magazines has fragmented accordingly, moving from the mass appeal of the older, more traditional magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* to the niched appeal of more recent entries such as *Cosmopolitan*, broadening the representations of women's pastimes (McCracken 1993). Ads now incorporate aspects of the broad sociocultural shifts in women's lives. The lone woman embodies, physically and figuratively, the cultural and historical shift from the home to the outside world. Perhaps she is the postmodern woman who constructs her identity "through eclectic borrowing of the fragments available in consumer culture. Women of this era are trained for growth and change; they are encouraged to develop wings, not roots" (Fournier 1998, p. 360).

The transformed social positioning(s) of women in North American society is perhaps the *most* important social development of this century. We argue that ad representations of the so-called "liberated" woman provide a rich discursive application and a springboard for a theoretical expansion of the advertising communication model. Further, we believe that our ad exemplar is constituted by discourses related to women in public life beyond the domestic sphere. But how is the transformed woman made intelligible by discourse? We draw perspective and substance from cultural studies (see Hall 1980, 1997) and feminist film criticism (see Byars 1991; Penley 1988; Pribram 1988) to develop a theoretical framework for interpreting the meanings of ads with the lone woman. Important previous research has addressed the same related set of topics; however, we offer a mode of interpreting advertising that explicitly incorporates

Table 1
List of Informants

Name	Age	Occupation	Interests	Marital Status
Terry	26	Graphic Designer	Art, reading	Married
Polly	33	Dietician	Computers	Single
Denise	25	Clerk	Clothes, animals	Married
Jean	33	Public Relations	Skiing, gardening	Married, one Son
Meena	20	Student/Cosmetian	Fashion, reading	Single
Lorna	30	Owns Fashion Agency	Sports, reading	Divorced, one daughter
Marilyn	28	Fundraising Consultant	Gardening, motorcycling	Single

the important issues: the problematic construction and positioning of the woman subject, the negotiation of meanings, the dialogic process of reading, and the problem of ideology.
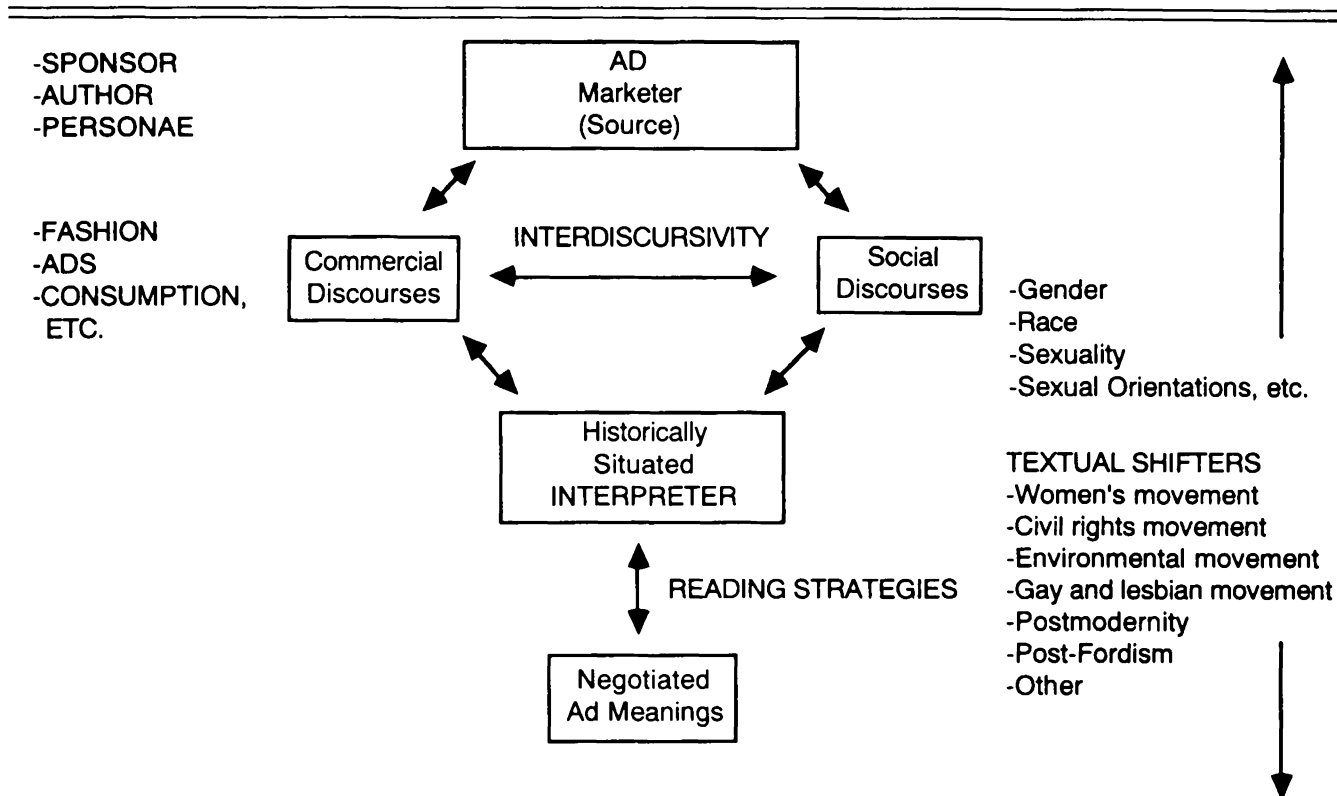
Method

One objective of our study was to synthesize relevant research in the advertising and consumer literatures with work in cultural studies to build on the advertising communication model. Another was to identify women consumers' interpretive strategies, while demonstrating that the ad interpretations that emerge are informed discursively within a specific ideological context. We determined that qualitative data from an actual consumption context would best serve our purpose. We chose the consumption of women's special interest magazines, a frequent and everyday event in many women's lives (Ferguson, Kreshel, and Tinkham 1990; McCracken 1993; Wolf 1991). Another strong argument that reinforced our choice is that almost all such magazines carry numerous advertisements for a wide array of products targeted to female consumers. We followed McCracken's (1988) guidelines for long interviews, and therefore requested and received the co-operation of eight women who agreed to take part in tape-recorded interviews lasting one to two hours. The majority of the informants, virtual strangers to us, were former clients of a community agency that provides counseling and training courses for local businesses and entrepreneurs. Two informants were students at the local university. The ages of the women ranged from 20 to 33 years. Seven of the eight worked full-time outside the home. The eighth woman, Meena, worked part-time as a cosmetician and took university

courses part time. Table 1 reports the women's names, ages, occupations, and some of their leisure interests.

For the interviews, the women brought some of their favorite magazines. We asked them to flip through the magazines as though they were reading them with a friend, which is not an uncommon event, as the majority of informants reported that they occasionally read magazines with friends. When they stopped at an ad that caught their attention, we asked them to talk about what they liked or disliked and what they thought and felt about the products and models featured. Interviews were fluid, phenomenological, and rather unstructured, for informants set the agenda when inspired by the ads. Among the magazines read were *Cosmopolitan, Woman's Day, Us, Shape, Self, Elle,* and *Vogue.*

We took special care to let the data 'speak' when identifying interpretive strategies and corresponding ad readings. First, we followed established protocols in protecting informants' privacy and identities, transcribing tapes, and asking broad questions about informants' lives to open the interviews. Our methodological approach was based on grounded theory (Geertz 1979; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin 1994), for our primary purpose was elaboration of theory through systematic analysis of empirical data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Our approach was to relate the themes derived from the data to literature and a theoretical framework, an illuminating and useful approach that has been employed before (cf. Holt 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). We independently and jointly read through the data, seeking expressions of common thematic categories and important differences among informants, and subsequently employed interpretive tacking to understand informants' in-

Figure 1
Revised Advertising Communication Model

-SPONSOR
-AUTHOR
-PERSONAE

AD
Marketer
(Source)

-FASHION
-ADS
-CONSUMPTION,
 ETC.

INTERDISCURSIVITY

Commercial
Discourses

Social
Discourses

-Gender
-Race
-Sexuality
-Sexual Orientations, etc.

Historically
Situated
INTERPRETER

TEXTUAL SHIFTERS
-Women's movement
-Civil rights movement
-Environmental movement
-Gay and lesbian movement
-Postmodernity
-Post-Fordism
-Other

READING STRATEGIES

Negotiated
Ad Meanings

Adopted and synthesized from Stern (1994), Thompson and Haytko (1997), Hirschman and Thompson (1997), and (Scott 1994 a,b).

terpretive strategies (cf. Hirschman and Thompson 1997). This study was conducted in the spirit of both discovery and justification (Deshpande 1983). Whereas the etic, theoretical categories which compose the revised ad model do not flow directly from the data, we have taken care in our argument below to demonstrate that the data illustrates instantiated manifestations of broad cultural viewpoints, ideologies, or discourses (see Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994) and that there are linkages between the etic concepts of the model and the emic perspectives of the informants (cf. Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

The Unstable, 'Leaky' and Dynamic Text: Theorizing Ideological Context and the Signifying Potential of Advertisements
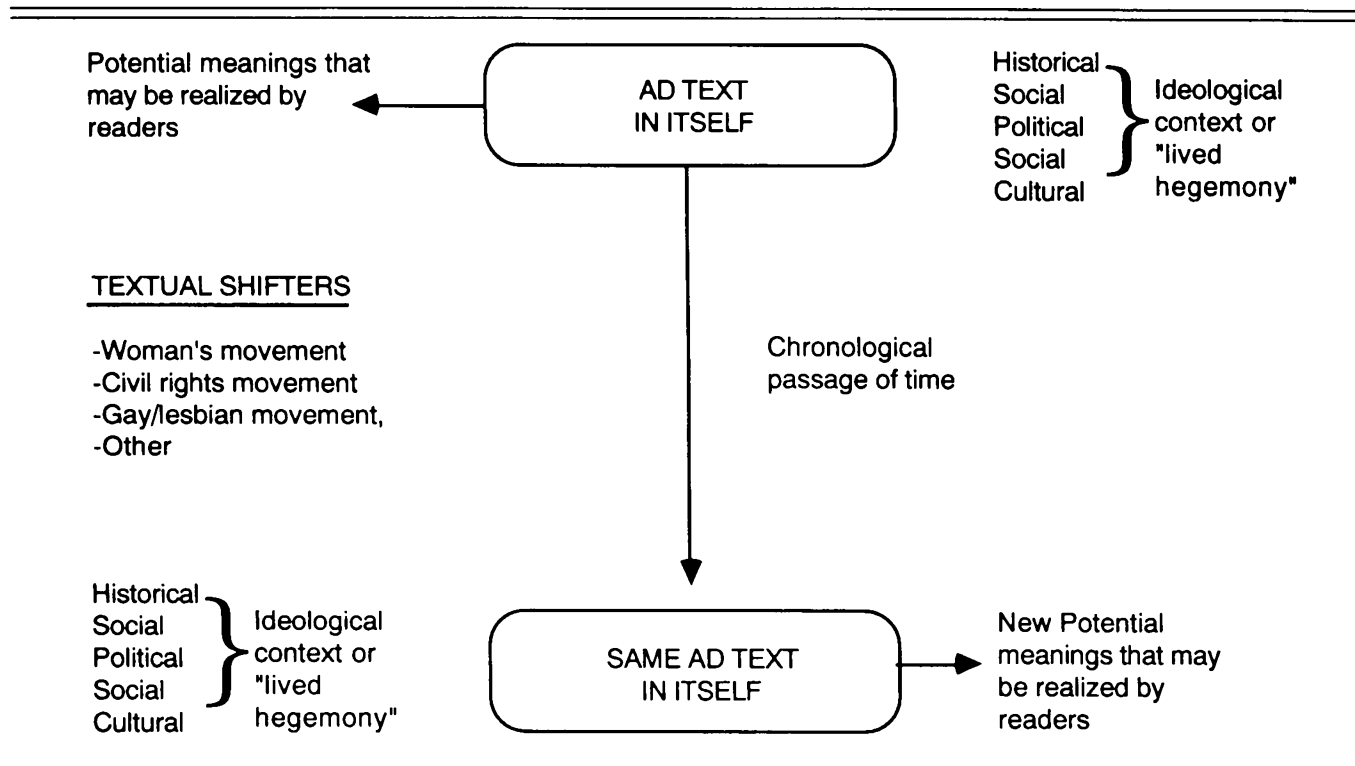
Although many of us may disagree with Humpty Dumpty's philosophical assertion that meaning is necessarily the product of the historical subject's inten-

tion, he does provoke an important question: Why does an ad "mean this but not that?" In other words, how is it that certain interpretations of an ad garner more "cultural weight" (Turner 1996) than others? To gain insight to the question, we turn to the central contribution of cultural studies: its conceptualizations and applications of ideology. In terms of the revised ad communication model Figure 1, the constructs we explore below provide a mode of understanding the extratextual ideological context (Figure 2) in which ad interpretation takes place.

A Working Conceptualization of Ideology

Ideology is the central construct addressed by cultural studies (Turner 1996). Further, given recent work in advertising research and other disciplines which has productively and critically incorporated it (see Eagleton 1991; Hirschman 1993; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997; J. Thompson 1984; Warlaumont 1995), it appears to

Figure 1
Revised Advertising Communication Model

Potential meanings that may be realized by readers ← AD TEXT IN ITSELF

Historical / Social / Political / Social / Cultural } Ideological context or "lived hegemony"

TEXTUAL SHIFTERS

-Woman's movement
-Civil rights movement
-Gay/lesbian movement,
-Other

Chronological passage of time

Historical / Social / Political / Social / Cultural } Ideological context or "lived hegemony"

SAME AD TEXT IN ITSELF → New Potential meanings that may be realized by readers

have considerable descriptive, analytical, and theoretical utility, despite challenge from postmodern perspectives (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1970, 1977, 1980; Hall 1986; Larrain 1994). We briefly summarize some of recent thought on ideology and justify just *how* ideological context is instrumental to the construction of ad meanings in a given historical moment.

Thompson (1984, p. 4) notes that ideology refers to the processes that legitimate the power of a dominant group or "the ways in which meaning (or significa-tion) serves to sustain relations of domination." Eagleton (1991) argues that Thompson's definition is the one most widely accepted. A particular "worldview" is naturalized so that acceptable beliefs are rendered self-evident and act as impediments to knowledge, self-determination, or freedom (Hetrick and Lozada 1994). Further, dissenting beliefs are deni-grated, obscured, and excluded from the realm of ac-ceptable discourse (Eagleton 1991). The problem, as Eagleton points out, is that "not every body of belief which people term ideological is associated with a *dominant* political power" (p. 6; his emphasis). But Foucault's (1980) contribution is helpful in this re-gard, despite poststructuralist challenge of the con-cept itself (see Larrain 1994). Foucault noted that

although power is dispersed throughout the social body, it is not necessarily dispersed *evenly*. Hence, we contend that multinational corporations with large advertising budgets that target female consumers *do* constitute a more powerful interest than that of one consumer. The implication is that although corporate advertising may significantly influence consumers' consciousness, it does not dominate it totally. An-other implication is that there are several ideological positions from which an ad may be interpreted.

Ideologies and Ad Text

For textual analysis, one problem is that ideology may work through semiotic sleight of hand. Verbal and written propositions along with visual images may help to promote an ideological position if the former are familiar aspects of everyday experience. As Eagleton (1991) argues, an ideology that fails to do so would not last long. A successful ideological posi-tion embedded within advertisements must incorpo-rate "true" propositions or images while simulta-neously harboring the goal of selling a product. "Some at least of what we call ideological discourse is true at one level but not at another: true in its empirical

content but deceptive in its force, or true in its surface meaning but false in its underlying assumptions" (Eagleton 1991, p. 16-17). On a deeper level, an ideology might be trying to persuade us to believe *in* something as opposed to simply believing something. In line with that notion, Althusser proposed that knowledge of one's social reality is produced through the effect of ideology (Althusser 1969, 1970; Williams 1977).

However, we argue that advertising researchers should be skeptical about such a modernist and conspiratorial view, for it is open to the criticisms of textual determinism and unproblematic authorial intention (see Barthes 1977). It is not appropriate to the complex and fragmented postmodern condition (Firat and Shultz 1997; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Holt 1997). The ideological potential of advertisements may be largely an unconscious phenomenon in that images and text in ads are constructed in the *absence* of any intention to distort and oppress (Hall 1982) beyond the obvious goal of selling products (Scott 1994b). In other words, the advertising executives, brand managers, copywriters, and art directors who co-operatively produce a particular ad are not involved in a cloak and dagger conspiracy to oppress women. Rather, as historical subjects, they unconsciously and unwittingly "speak" dominant discourse(s) and adapt certain tacit, unquestioned ideological positions and conventions that render women intelligible. "Ideology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, *rather than an intention of the agent*" (Hall 1982, p. 88, italics added).

As a systemic phenomenon, ideological reproduction occurs at the level of the ad producer *and* the ad consumer. In the following passage, Denise's evaluation of female models in Calvin Klein ads provides an account of how the ad images in a women's magazine prompt the reinforcement of a common ideological position:

> The girls are so...natural...that Calvin Klein, natural kind of look and I'm about as un-natural as they come.[I: Talk about that.] Because I've always worn makeup all my life, I've always...this is the first time in my life I've not had nails (acrylic). I've always liked fake and bake tans—anything that I could do to change myself. Like if I could afford plastic surgery I would do it. [I: What would you have done?] I would have my breasts done...I would have liposuction...and would have abs put in...and I would have my ankles thinned. [I: Where does that need come from?] Because I've never felt beautiful...I don't feel like that. I don't feel that way about myself...and I'm very critical of myself and other people as well. And think that's just from being unhappy with myself. All my life I've felt that I have thick ankles. Always. I see pictures

> and I go "ewww!" I used to wear really high heels to make my legs look skinnier cause I used to hate that I had such big legs I guess. I always felt that I had big legs.

The passage reveals Denise's harsh, judgmental gaze (Foucault 1977; Thompson and Hirschman 1995), for she scrutinizes every facet of her appearance and finds herself lacking in comparison with a normative beauty ideal (cf. Richins 1991; Wolf 1991). She evaluates her appearance from a particular ideological position that goes virtually unproblematized. She is "speaking" within the confines of one dominant and entrenched gendered discourse about female bodies, that of the "natural look." In that context, "natural" assumes a particular connotation. It refers to her imperfect body in contrast to the "made up" one enabled by her use of cosmetics: "she [the model in an Ann Taylor design ad] is very natural looking to me. And that's not me at all. I'm made right up...I get up in the morning and I shower immediately, and I do my hair and my makeup...I'll do my makeup always always always. I never leave the house without makeup." Denise is made to feel lesser by her own mercilessly panoptic gaze.

Complex, stable, yet cultural conditions, and the variety of possible interpretive standpoints are conducive to key *performative contradictions*— "contradiction[s] between a meaning conveyed explicitly and a meaning conveyed by the act itself of conveying" (Turner 1983, p. 26) occur as the consumer interprets ads. The manner, executional elements, messages, or style of an ad may appear to be at odds with its preferred meaning(s), potentially alerting women to various other interpretations and inspiring the construction of negotiated readings of the ad (Hall 1980; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). In other words, a variety of interpretive positions and conflicting cultural meanings that may inform the everyday act of reading a woman's magazine (Rabine 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997.

Diachronic Aspects of Ad Meanings: Textual Shifting

Discourse as a basis for speech and action implies that women have become intelligible in different ways at different historical junctures. Much mainstream discourse has been influenced by decades of feminist critique, political action, and women's presence in the workforce. Given that discourses transform, how is it that the ad text realizes a *particular* set of meanings? We acknowledge that ads invite many viable read-

ings, but only some of them may be realized within a given historical, ideological context. Dyer (1982) rejects the notion of the "text in itself" and conceptualizes text and context as inseparable, broadening the text to include *extratextual* elements such as historical social discourses. The multitude of intertextual relations between various ads and discourses increases polysemic potential (Fiske 1987), allowing a great variety of meanings to be negotiated within actual contexts of use (see Holt 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Figure 2 illustrates the effect of textual shifters on ad meanings.

Further, Bennett and Woollacott (1988) contend that the meaning potential of any text must be considered in relation to social conditions that frame its interpretation. Textual shifters are broad historical and sociocultural influences—such as the women's and civil rights movements in North America—that influence discourses and as thus, can foreground or background various aspects of the ad text (called "pieces of play"), helping it to realize some meanings while silencing others. Although it may have been acceptable fifty years ago to think of and speak about women exclusively in their domestic and childbearing roles, it is now deemed unacceptable to do so. The cultural position(s) of ads that represent women has been shifted to a radically changed ideological context. The shift constitutes more than just a change of context, for textual shifters, throughout the passage of time, alter the text itself (Bennett and Woolacott 1988; Turner 1996) in terms of its overall signifying potential. Therefore, we reject the formalist conceptualization of ad text that is implicitly grounded in the "container metaphor" (cf. Holt 1997) of meaning (i.e., meanings as immanent in ad text).

Synchronic Ad Meaning and Hegemonic Accommodation

As Byars (1991) convincingly argues, multiple ideological stances co-exist within the overall American ideology, for American society is quite complex. Therefore, Gramsci's (1971) work on hegemony – dominance attained by configurations of ideologies within the context of struggle and negotiation – is relevant here. Cultural leadership must be won and rewon continually, vying with various forms of cultural resistance by historical subjects and competing with other ideologies (Williams 1977). That contest has significant implications for the textual meanings in advertising. Stern (1989) provides a literary critique of a 1928 ad for Ivory Flakes detergent. The ad and

Stern's argument strongly suggest that the ideological context of that era socially positioned female consumers as being preoccupied with "charming trifles," degrading the value of women's daily work within the home. Such an anachronistic advertising pitch would not work today, for it would be strikingly out of line with the relevant textual shifters. From our theoretical perspective, the fact that many advertisers use images of women living outside traditional gendered lines of shopping, childcare, housework, cooking, and caring-for-others roles may represent the genuine hegemonic accommodation of large corporations as they compete for cultural and commercial share of consciousness (cf. Hall 1982).

We cannot go back in time and gather data by showing 1990s ads to 1950s homemakers. However, Terry, who works as a graphic designer at a local newspaper, interprets an ad that strikes her as a "1950s Beaver Cleaver" sort of image and, somewhat paradoxically, inspires her intertextual allusion to the 1980s supermom/superwoman icon. Overall, the following passage affords an excellent example of the way texts shift in meaning over time as a result of the broad social shifts in women's experiences:

> This [ad for Lifetime show, Television for Women, in Cosmopolitan, December 1997] is kind of a funny ad. It reads: "It's not easy to pull together the perfect holiday..." Well I guess some women think they have to do it all and that's kind of saying that if you watch this program you can [do it all]. Like in the olden days. What would that be...the 1950s? I think they are trying to say that women can do it all and if watch their show they'll show you how. How to be like a superwoman. [I: What do you think of the superwoman icon?] I think it's unrealistic and that it's hard on women. Because I think that you can either be domestic oriented or you can be more career oriented. Both of them are equal— but I don't think you can do both. Like I don't think I can do both. And I don't think that you should feel that you have to do both. Unless you have a partner that is doing both as well and then you can balance it out. I think one person doing it all is too overwhelming and unrealistic and not fair.

Terry refers to a recent ad in *Cosmopolitan* done in 1950s style with an impeccably dressed and coiffed mother (wearing pearl earrings, just like June Cleaver) who is serving a Thanksgiving dinner to her family. Dad is at the head of the perfect table, and the children are attractive in stereotypical "Beaver Cleaver family" style. In Terry's view, the ad execution provokes feelings of anxiety by eliciting an allusion to the 1980s supermom or superwoman icon. Given Terry's 1990s context of work commitments and home

responsibilities, both June Cleaver and Superwoman are problematized as anachronistic and unrealistic. The ad may have made sense in the 1950s before feminism altered the gender[ed] landscape, and it may have fit the 1980s superwoman icon who tried to do it all, but its signifying possibilities are limited by more recent developments in gender expectations. Perhaps as a result of the women's movement's legacy, Terry expects women to have partners who share equitably in private household responsibilities. Hence, for Terry, the ad realizes negative meanings and is evaluated as incompatible with her own gender identity, for she does not identify with the image in the ad. Through a relevant textual shift and accompanying altered discourses, the ad assumes a different cultural position than it would have held in either the 1950s or in the 1980s. In a sense, the *Lifetime* ad is remarkably out of line with many advertisers' hegemonic accommodations of the recent past. Terry's interpretation is an example of how hegemonic process entails a struggle among a number of ideological positions within a historical juncture.

In sum, the realized meanings of ads depend on dynamic, *historically grounded* discourses. Further, hegemony is achieved through vying for a leading commercial interest. Dominant interests in society must be *genuinely* accommodative of opposing societal interests if they are to negotiate a position of leadership, producing the common sense view that social arrangements benefit the dominated (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1982; Turner 1996). For a lived hegemony (Williams 1977) to be relevant to advertising, the tacit cultural viewpoints that ads encompass must lend themselves to the easy development of situational, interpretive frameworks (Holt 1997) brought to bear within actual consumption contexts (such as examining an ad in one's favourite women's magazine). In the context of advertising to women *specifically*, meanings must resonate with market segments of women consumers and speak to their lived experience as women such as problematic relationships with food (Bordo 1993), one's body (Schouten 1991; Thompson and Hirschman 1995), or the "juggling" lifestyle (Thompson 1996) Finally, meanings and images must also appear familiar and friendly, drawn from a pool of other mass media vehicles such as television shows or films (Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Traube 1992).

A lived hegemony never remains static or in place. In our postmodern era, social conditions are complex, and so are the marketing environments of competing organizations and influential political lobbies. Countervailing and contradictory cultural perspec-

tives (Thompson and Haytko 1997) are capable of inspiring clashing interpretive disjunctures. To make matters even more complicated, they are juxtaposed against individual differences and group interests based on gender, race, ethnicity, subculture, sexual orientations, lifestyles, taste, and so on (see Bourdieu 1984; Hebdige 1979; Holt 1997; Solomon 1996). Moreover, damning feminist critique of advertising has entered popular speech (Pollay 1986; Pollay and Mittal 1993). In sum, hegemonic process *negotiates* for leadership among diverse streams of thought. At any given time, however, certain potential ad meanings may achieve a higher degree of shared cultural weight and semiotic closure within contexts of use, interpretation, or conversation. Within that complexity, spaces are available for resistance and reading against the grain. As Holt (1997, p. 342) notes, "different social contexts and different historical periods produce specific sociocultural configurations of [social] categories. These classificatory regimes...structure cultural understandings..." Therefore, an ad's set of potential meanings changes because the world around it has changed. Here today, gone tomorrow.

We next flesh out the other components of our proposed ad communication model, (Figure 1) which are drawn from previous research in advertising (Scott 1994a, b; Stern 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997), cultural studies (Bennett and Woollacott 1988; Dyer 1982; Fiske 1987; Hall 1980, 1982; Turner 1996; Williams 1977), and our interview data.

Commercial and Social Discourses

"Discourses" are defined as sets of ideas that provide presuppositional understanding and "ways of speaking" about topics or subjects (Foucault 1977, 1978; Hall 1997; Holt 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997). They are grounded in historical social practice, operate at the everyday level of lived experience, and are inextricably linked to relations of power (Foucault 1980; Hall 1997); Lorna's perspective of women's depictions in magazine ads illustrates the way that ad interpretions are constituted by social and commercial discourses.

> I think this is one of the industries [modeling] where it's a role reversal where the male models don't make as much as the female models. That's kind of different....They're a lot more conservative with men too—quite often. They don't often put them [men] in vulnerable situations and settings. I don't see too many. You know like what they put around them wouldn't make them weak or anything—it's always the strong attractive male. [I: And the women?] They're getting better...you can see these women are a little more no nonsense but

having fun and "in charge" type attitudes no mat-
ter what the settings are—quite often. It's less and
less the ones where you see the depressed, frail,
fragile and totally helpless female—and I'm glad
to see that. I don't like to see the totally helpless
female. [I: Where has the totally helpless woman
gone?] Probably women's attitudes of today. Because
they are trying to become more independent. More
chameleon type....but more in charge in themselves
and they want to be seen that way too or come
across that way without being "butchy!" [I: What's
butchy?] You know when the feminists say, "to be
equal you had to be like a man" so you would dress,
act and behave male almost. Which was kind of sad
I think and I think you should be able to be a strong
female and still be feminine. Women have evolved—
you don't see them so much in the homemaker situ-
ation—not that there is anything wrong with that
either, depending on what you choose—but it's not
an expected or a given anymore. You see [women] in
a whole variety of settings now, you see them in
romantic settings, you see them in risqué settings,
rebellious settings, and so on....I like that variety.
Not just the good housewife.

Although Lorna is speaking primarily about
women's cultural positions, she also alludes to a more
commercial discourse concerning the modeling indus-
try, a phenomenon we identify as "interdiscursivity,"
a term describing how discourses intertwine in speech
to inform the everyday act of reading women's maga-
zines. Lorna's passage draws from a popular discourse
of our time in describing the way women have become
intelligible and distinct in contrast to men *and*
"women of the past," the latter being a mythical, ste-
reotypical construct—the unhappy, helpless home-
maker. The chameleon-like modern woman is versa-
tile and competent in both domestic and professional
spheres of life. Lorna also alludes to the construction
of her own femininity by distancing herself from
"butchy" types. (i.e. feminist, overly masculine, and
possibly lesbian). The discourse about women is use-
ful to Lorna because it helps her understand the
differences between current and past generations of
women. It also helps her construct her own gender
identity, for it draws upon a discourse related to
traditional and non-traditional conceptions of femi-
ninity (feminine and "butchy"). Although Lorna val-
ues various qualities associated with the women's
movement ("controlled strength" and independence),
she demonizes a construct she labels "butchy" femi-
nism, a term also grounded in her understanding of
the women's movement. The overall theoretical point
is that understanding of ads emerges in relation to
various discourses and is not textually determined as
suggested by the current ad model.

Discourses about 'What Advertising is for'

One important category of commercial discourse
relevant to the nature of advertising in women's maga-
zines constitutes the character of acceptance versus
skepticism toward ads (Scott 1994b) and the condi-
tions of intelligibility (how advertising is regarded
and understood) in general. Our informants made
many comments about the nature of advertising such
as "it's [an ad] extreme and sometimes trashy, like
the stories in *Cosmo*" (Karen) or "it's light entertain-
ment" (Jean). Other comments included "this [ad]
doesn't do much for me. I can't relate to her at all.
She's a waif" (Jean). Some informants noted that "things
[ad depictions of women] are getting more fair."

These comments reflect intersecting types of dis-
courses that influence the ways ads are to be under-
stood. Ads in magazines may be appreciated for their
color and physical beauty (a form of "entertainment"),
or they may act as fashion arbiters or enablers, help-
ing women to compose their images with fragments
of consumer culture. They may be used as a means of
reinforcing various aspects of self-concept, as a means
of representing qualities one would like to cultivate,
or even as a means of criticizing culturally entrenched
beauty standards. Often, the women in our study
referred to ads as "realistic and unrealistic," and that
pattern of response requires some interpretation (cf.
Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Our informants' judg-
ments suggest that consumers view pictures as true
accounts (i.e., "objective reality") rather than as rheto-
ric (see Scott 1994a). That hegemonic aspect of ad
representation does not go uncontested, however. For
example, Jean reported that she feels very comfort-
able with her life and appearance, and asserted that
"these ads are just a way of displaying clothes," im-
plicitly acknowledging that ads, for her, are creative
fictions. But overall, the magazine ads appear to play a
key role in legitimating various authoritative beliefs
about health and fitness, acceptable appearance crite-
ria, and a mindset of comparison—all aspects of a
traditional gendered discourse (see Bordo 1993; Th-
ompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman
1995) that conflate appearance with self-worth and
underlying personal character. To the extent that such
implications go undetected and unchallenged, operations
of disciplinary power are perpetuated (Foucault 1980).

Fashion Discourses

The "natural look" (Thompson and Haytko 1997)
bears further comment as an important form of
commercial fashion discourse. Most of our informants

mentioned "natural" looks in the context of evaluating the ads in the magazines. When reading *Cosmopolitan*, Jean noted that "natural" refers to one particular reformulation of a beauty ideal: images that impress readers as real, authentic, warm, and healthy, and in contrast to "overly made up" gendered images that strike them as "plastic and phony" (Polly). "Natural" is a paradox because although it signifies freedom from fashion pressures, Terry and other informants note that achieving the seemingly effortless look demands and requires significant time investment and physical labour. "[Y]ou know 'cause [the ad is for] Noxzema and doesn't say anything, it doesn't tell you how to be. It just presents it [the product]." Yet, ironically, Noxzema is a required resource for the personal care rituals so characteristic of adherence to fashion norms! Terry's statement is an instance of disciplinary power's ideological capacity to "cover its tracks" (Foucault 1980), naturalizing certain fashion images over others and legitimating concrete self-care practices that are characteristic of disciplinary norms (cf. Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Discourses and the Activities of Marketers

Discourses also influence the activities of marketers. Sales reports, marketing research surveys, letters of complaint or thanks, retailer reactions, conversations with channel intermediaries, boycotts, public outcries, and protests by interest groups are the various feedback mechanisms by which corporations learn about social change and which help shape their subsequent portrayals of women. The Calvin Klein ad campaign of 1995 provides an extreme example of that phenomenon (Goldman 1995). Klein had released a series of ads featuring ostensibly underage adolescents. Further, the skinny models were portrayed in a way that some critics labeled pedophilic. After public protests and threats of retailer withdrawal, the company cancelled the ads. The combined effect of current discourses about the acceptability of representations is instrumental in shaping how certain groups such as the young or women are depicted in future ads. Discourses do not simply funnel down, and they are not unilaterally imposed on consumers. Rather, discourses are grounded in social conditions and permeate the interactions among various stakeholder groups. Knowledge of discourses enables marketers to appropriate the meanings adhering to social movements and societal transformations, allowing for hegemonic accommodation (see Hall 1980, 1982; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

Bridging the Gap From Text to Mind: The Discursive Constitution of the Socially, Historically Situated Interpreting Subject

The subject refers to a centred versus decentred understanding of self. *Subjectivism* finds its roots in the humanistic philosophical tradition that attributes a privileged and dominant status to the individual mind and thought: *"Cogito ergo sum."* The subject in poststructuralist thought constitutes a reaction against humanist ideology that grants the preeminent status of "maker of meaning" to the individual (Hall 1997; Rice and Waugh 1996), a decidedly logocentric position (Derrida 1981). Foucault (1980) also theorized about the production of knowledges and the displaced subject in his discussion of discourse, and argued that discourse is the producer of knowledges (Foucault 1980). The relevant implication is that consumers become entangled within discourses when seeking to understand ads (see Foucault 1970, 1977, 1978, 1980; Hall 1997; see also Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Consequentially, some research in advertising is rather problematic. Note the following claim: "[r]eading as a consumer involves assembling textual cues, but also having the willingness to 'be' a particular fictive reader..." (Scott 1994b, p. 471). But willingness to "do" *what*? To "be" *what*? Discourse constitutes these important "whats." Although we acknowledge that consumers assume and reject multiple interpretive stances (Iser 1978; Scott 1994b, p. 473) during the interaction of text and reader, we conceptualize the reader of ads as someone who may "willingly" accept or reject the subject position created for him or her *and interprets the ad in relation to the associated social and commercial discourses* (Foucault 1970; Hall 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997) or knowledge systems (Thompson and Hirschman 1995) in which s/he has been "entangled" (p. 145), such as normalized ideals of beauty (Bordo 1993), which provide bases of social comparison (Richins 1991; Wolf 1991).

Discourses render the woman subject understandable to self and others. They also inform consumers' various interpretive ad frameworks and self narratives which, in turn, highlight *some* experiences, meanings, and ad elements while backgrounding others (cf. Bennett and Woollacott 1988; Thompson 1997). The interpretive frameworks tend to be dynamic, for discourses and social conditions change, and they have relevance for the use of interpretive strategies and the construction of personalized ad meanings. Dialogically, negotiated

ad meanings then facilitate the ongoing development of interpretive frameworks (Thompson 1997).

Consumer Reading Strategies and Negotiated Ad Meanings

Although Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) empirically grounded reading strategies (inspiring/aspiring, deconstructing/rejecting, and identifying/individualizing) are appropriate for understanding relationships between advertising and mass media, their categories are insufficient for describing *all* ad readings (cf. Brunsdon and Morley 1980; Hall 1980; Morley 1980, 1981), and subsequent research has established that a greater variety of reading strategies are employed. For example, some readings in media studies were not based on class as an organizing principle, and the dominant code was overlooked or ignored (Morley 1980, 1981). Further, ethnicity and gender emerged as important factors in text interpretation (see also Byars 1991). One cannot assume that all readers apply similar levels of sophistication, cultural knowledge, or symbolic capital when interpreting ads (Bourdieu 1984). Although consumers share similar cultural knowledge, they differ profoundly on the bases of race, ethnicity, gender, experience, and so on. Previous research (see Byars 1991; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Turner 1996) suggests that a reader may assume several ideological positions within the context of a lived hegemony. A consumer may use one of many reading strategies, as appropriate to the consumption context. Therefore, we reject the notion of preferred and oppositional readings in favor of a multitude of subtly negotiated ones.

Jean: An Idiographic Case Analysis

Jean, a married woman in her thirties, works full time as a public affairs officer in an insurance company, travels frequently for her job, has a three-year-old son, cycles, works out, gardens in summer, skis in winter, and takes a class at the local university. Her current position provides a maternity leave at work, and she is looking forward to "getting back" to part time work so she can spend more time with her son as "they [children] grow up like that and you could miss it." Her life is strikingly similar to those of the women described by Thompson (1996), for Jean "juggles" work, childcare, travel, exercise, household tasks, shopping, and rare personal time. Currently, she reads women's magazines while travelling, devoting an hour here and there to "flipping through" *Cosmopolitan*, *Chatelaine*, *Woman's Day*, and occasionally *Elle* and

Vogue. She reports that price is an important factor, for her family is on a budget, and she and her husband spend a significant portion of the household income on daycare and other childcare expenses. Hence, she rarely reads the latter two magazines, for they are more expensive than the first three noted.

As our interview progressed, the second author understood that her general interpretive strategy is one which we call "aesthetic evaluation." She reads magazines to enjoy the artistry of advertisements, a pattern shared by other informants. Jean flips through until a particularly colorful and attractive ad "catches her eye" although some ads "do nothing for [her]." When a particularly colorful or "flashy" ad attracts her attention, she attempts to "relate" to the model, critiquing her hair, makeup, body type, and clothing, sometimes in light of previous knowledge of the model. If the model is older (a woman who appears to be in her late twenties or early thirties), wears more conservative clothing, and has subdued "natural" makeup and hairstyle, Jean feels she can easily relate to her and to the product. She then thinks about whether her family can afford the cosmetics or fashions depicted. Usually they cannot, and although Jean holds very positive evaluations of Lancome cosmetics, she asserts that they are too expensive for her and her family, but Estée Lauder, another favored brand, is much more affordable.

Although Jean claims that "light entertainment" is her primary goal in reading women's magazines and the ads, she employs several interpretive strategies. The screening strategy is her requirement that ads be colorful and eyecatching. Otherwise, she flips the page without a second look. Beyond that, she employs a strategy of relating to the model's style and the product's benefits to her own life themes and projects (Mick and Buhl 1992), reinforcing her self concept as a good (working) mother. Raising her son is her primary endeavour, and this concern influences Jean's strategies. Only sensible and affordable products are considered for her personal use. She evaluates ads for products suitable for a mother of a toddler. For example, she noted that an ad for Miller clothing in *Woman's Day* was for the "mom-ish kind of clothes," which are affordable, sensible, casual, and durable. Moreover, she carefully evaluates ads in *Woman's Day* which feature products for young children, such as one for Barney the Dinosaur movies which she has rented and might buy for her son. Secondarily, controlling her weight (she has been overweight before and does not like "feeling fat") and leading an active life are important life projects. Jean therefore attempts to identify with models only if they resemble a "type

of look" that is older, casual, and "natural." Ads are immediately rejected as "unrealistic" or "silly" if the model looks "eight years old," "anorexic" or "like an airhead."

Throughout Jean's narrative, certain discursive currents can be identified. Foremost is a traditional, gendered discourse constituting the "good mother" illustrated by her efforts to find clothes suitable for "moms" and products for her toddler. Importantly, her commitment to motherhood and thriftiness affords her a critical position from which to critique ads. The tacit ideological position of working mother accords her licence to construct oppositional readings to certain ads: "When you have a family, it's not a priority to have [brand] names on [clothing]." Like many women, Jean feels caught between traditional notions of motherhood and domesticity and the more recent expanded formulations of women's gender roles (see Fournier 1998; Thompson 1996). In light of Jean's social and historical position as a working mother, certain meanings in the ad texts are accepted ("This is for mom-ish kind of clothes...practical and affordable. It's an awesome ad. I'm a mom, I relate to it because there's a kid in it. It's fun."), and others are rejected ("She [the model] looks eight years old. I don't relate to [the Jockey underwear ad] at all.") Overall, Jean constructs personalized ad meanings ("You can be attractive without being skinny and model gorgeous") which negotiate among culturally imposed beauty standards, feminist critique of those ideals, and conceptions of motherhood.

We next discuss other interpretive strategies gleaned from informants' interviews.

Godzilla versus Bambi?—NOT!: Knowledge vs. Knowledge

Knowledge about fashion and beauty standards constructed from ads and articles is often countered, reinforced, or elaborated on by the knowledge developed in professional settings (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Although consumers become entangled in knowledge systems as demonstrated by their reported beliefs, that condition is not without contradiction. Traditionally, women have been socialized into the domestic, consumer role (Stern 1989), but more recently, the traditional role has been supplemented by the newer professional one with corresponding changes in women's authoritative knowledges and interpretive frameworks.

Lorna, a co-owner of a modeling agency, evaluated a Pantene shampoo ad in *Mademoiselle* accordingly, drawing from her personal and professional experience:

> Nice hair but impossible. It's just too perfect. [I: This doesn't exist?] Oh I'm sure it does but it would

cost a lot of expense and time...even though they're trying to say it's not. For someone like me who's tried a lot of different things and had a lot of disappointments based on that sort of thing...when I see things are too good to be true and almost guaranteed I am very skeptical—it's like, "I'll pass."

Generally, consumers gain personal experience with products that subsequently leads to a more critical disposition toward ads and their claims. However, Lorna's passage is a good example of the way one particular informant uses extensive work experience and insider knowledge to construct an oppositional interpretation. She does not reject the product, but she does reject the perceived simplicity of the rhetorical claim conveyed through vivid imagery.

Similarly, Terry works as a graphic designer in a newspaper, and is able to evaluate the technology that produces the so-called perfect images:

> I guess the only time it bothers me seeing models that I feel inadequate is like when it's for cellulite cream or something like and they're half naked and thinking "oh man...I think that's airbrushing but gee I wish my legs looked even close to that." [I: So you suspect they use airbrushing?] Yes. I know how the magazine industry works and I know what the computer technology is and stuff. [I: Can you show me an example?] You see her skin is flawless, right? [I: So knowing that then – does that alter the way you look at ads?] Slightly, but not as much as it should. I mean I know that, but I still think, "oh gee, you know." Its such an ideal, it doesn't really matter if she's real or not.

Terry's comments illustrate that professional knowledge, despite its authority, does not necessarily go unchallenged. Although she knows that ad images are manufactured and recognizes that the beauty standard is an unattainable ideal, Terry exhibits the qualities of "mythical thinking" (Barthes 1972; Thompson and Haytko 1997): "I know, but all the same..."). On a conscious level, Terry gravitates toward the image but does not silence her critical voice. Underlying her passage is a tangled knot of popular discourses about fashion, beauty, and women's bodies, none of which can be completely discounted despite her years of professional career history. Mythical thinking represents an attempt to negotiate among countervailing cultural meanings to forge a personalized ad meaning. On the one hand, Terry has airbrushed photographs herself and understands the attempt to alter images and manipulate consumers' impressions. On the other hand, she aspires to emulate a fashion model in one respect. Although her own knowledge has gained legitimate currency, so has that of the fashion industry, as disseminated through the relevant

gatekeepers: journalists, editors, and fashion icons. Therefore, personal and professional knowledges, combined with commercial discourses, inform negotiated personalized ad meanings. In the background is the relevant sociocultural influence—the transformed role of women – which places Terry in the public, professional sphere and affords her an ideological position from which to criticize and to invest confidence in her own evaluations.

Polly, a dietican, interpreting a "moustache" ad for skim milk, offers an instance of the way scientific knowledge of health practices is employed in an interpretation to counter an ad's possible preferred meaning:

> Stuff like this...what they are advertising kind of bores me. Because I have a nutrition background and, "yada, yada, yada..." They are talking about the word "fat" and they have such a negative connotation about fat and it's no good, and [reads ad]. [I: Is fat bad?] No, it has a place. But people don't believe that, they just say, and this ad is saying that it is no good. And it just chokes me, it's such a misconception even though fat has its place. Everything in moderation—and fat definitely in moderation. And you know without fat, we'd be dead. It's too extreme. People who don't have a nutrition background will go, "Oh my God! I'll never eat fat again." Especially young girls...I'm more worried about the younger generation. They might interpret that as, " I won't drink milk at all because it might have fat," if you read that the wrong way.

Polly interprets from a privileged position in relation to the ad sponsors and consumers who might believe the ad. Here, the body and self-care practices are sites of struggle and resistance among various health-related beliefs. Yet, Polly is still entangled in knowledge systems, and she speaks from a particular discursive position that esteems "balance and moderation," countering a more dominant popular discourse that she positions as more "extreme" and oppressive to women, particularly young ones. To be entangled in knowledge or discourse is not always a bad thing, for it helps consumers organize their social worlds, positions, and self-concepts. But Polly is not outside power relations, as her interpretation exemplifies the way power relations are knowledge productive (Foucault 1980). She rejects the extremity of eliminating fat, but is constrained by discourses that prescribe moderation for fitness.

Comparisons: Constructing the Average Woman

The natural look discussion was often related to a discourse concerning the "average woman" who, according to informants' reports, is not usually depicted in ads. Yet, in an exceptional instance, when evaluating an ad for Dove soap in *Cosmopolitan* (see Appendix One), Polly remarks that she loves the ad and identifies with it, for it represents an "attainable and balanced" beauty:

> Yes, but when I say "average person," I don't mean not beautiful. I like that a lot. And I commend them for being...for going out there and doing the opposite of what one would expect for a commercial. It seems advertisers are going more and more that way. Hitting a clearer cross section of people in the world so that they can target people and have them relate to themselves and go, you know, that's kind of like me—that's more down to earth. That [the Dove ad] is more reality—realistic. "I can touch base with this [the Dove ad]," a person would say, [rather] than looking at something and going "this is so not me." And then they dream about it or whatever. This just touches home.

The average woman is a reformulation of the natural look; it does not undermine informants' self-esteem , and they can more easily identify with it. Moreover, Polly's aesthetic evaluations of the Dove model—a dignified, older looking African American woman—reflect concrete manifestations of damning feminist critique about the fashion industry's unattainable beauty ideals.

The average woman serves as an important touchstone for informants. Through comparison, she helps them to negotiate a key tension within postmodern consumer society: the requirement to conform and belong versus the one to be individual and special (cf. Thompson and Haytko 1997). The average woman provides an ego-defensive function, enabling informants to enjoy the ads in magazines as entertainment and as inspiration for their own fashion endeavours, relatively free from feelings of inadequacy. She helps informants distance themselves from images that threaten self-esteem or, conversely, helps them to aspire to images that enhance and reinforce key aspects of self-concept.

Polly's passage below illustrates the way that images can seem threatening to women consumers. However, rather than comparing herself with the image and feeling inferior, she employs a strategy of distancing herself from the image, using the construct of the average woman and denigrating the potential impact of the ad depiction. Thus, comparison processes are not straightforward (cf. Richins 1991; i.e., the actual woman comparing herself with the model). Rather, many informants compared the models with an abstract construction of an everyday woman and were able to preserve self-esteem while drawing on

various *conflicting* discourses about what women should look like:

> It [depiction of women in ads] is changing...isn't there a magazine or something that's new... sure, I just heard about it. That's great...that will target normal people. Normal meaning the average woman. I really think she's too skinny...but if you had asked me that question 10 years ago I would have said, "Yeah, she's [the woman depicted in the Revlon ad in Allure she's looking at] too skinny but gee wouldn't it be nice to look like that." [I: You don't think like that anymore?] No. Not like that. Because they are too skinny. I have an ideal about what I'd like to look like and this isn't it. [I: WHAT'S YOUR IDEAL?] I went to the body building competition two weeks ago. I don't do body building, I don't believe in it...I don't believe in the steroids, it's against my professional ethics anyway. But the Ms. Fitness portion of it—with a focus on agility, flexibility, a bit of talent—that sort of thing. Its not like Ms. USA or anything. Those girls, they look beautiful! They are strong, they are worked out...their muscles are defined and they have wonderful symmetry and they are healthy...their bodies are the way they are and they just worked them out and eaten well and done a routine and they looked beautiful. That's where I want to be.

Mode Magazine targets women from sizes 4 to 24. The first issue featured eight cover models who were all size fourteens. Interestingly, *Mode* facilitates another comparison strategy: women may look at its large models and feel slim and superior by contrast, interpreting within the parameters of dominant gendered discourses. Thus, the average woman construct works flexibly in another way, for it allows consumers to position themselves as both similar to her and yet unique. Polly does so by aspiring to a "healthy, fit" ideal figure which contrasts with her perceptions of "skinny and unhealthy" fashion models and deviant "bodybuilders." Further, she positions herself a little farther from "the average woman" who is not as toned and "beautiful" as she hopes to be.

It is a comfort to our informants to "see" the average woman in depictions of fabulous supermodels such as Cindy Crawford. Denise, who confessed that she does not have a positive body image, forges more positive self-related meanings from ads depicting famous models:

> There's Cindy Crawford...there's a classic. She's a classic model. She's our age and isn't that scary. She's older than I normally would think for a model... and I think because blondes have been played up so much to be so glamorous and so beautiful and every blonde has a body and you just kinda go, "No they don't."

Sometimes, Denise reinforces positive aspects of self-concept by finding at least one quality (or flaw) of the average woman incorporated into idealized images and then shares in the glamour. She humanizes and subsequently individualizes her interpretations by talking about Crawford's "advanced age." Denise uses ads as meaning-full resources that, when conflated with average woman qualities, bring the supermodel to her level. Further, she uses the more humanized version of Crawford as a valued symbolic resource to counter another common manifestation of beauty discourses: the notion that blondes have more fun.

We propose that there is an intersection of conflicting discourses constructing the woman subject and underlying women's reading strategies. Certainly, some ideological positions contradict others (e.g., feminism's struggle for equality and traditional portrayals of women as subordinate), but the historical female subject is evolving too. Through practice, she acquires the know-how to negotiate the tensions of being a woman within patriarchal social relations. The multitude of tacit ideological positions underlying informants' interpretations reflect the contradictory historical juncture where contemporary women find themselves, in a complex ideology of consumption (Bocock 1993; Giddens 1991). Some ads do portray women in a manner interpreted as empowering, and they represent instances of hegemonic accommodation (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1982). Yet, sexist residual meanings are present too, undermining the ideal of gender equality. Such ads construct a woman subject who is not only more secure in her expanded societal roles, but also constrained within patriarchal institutions. Use of the product evokes perceptions of gender equality, perhaps perpetuating a cycle of felt tension (provoked by conflicting role expectations in social relations) and then temporary resolution of that tension. Reading strategies are the means by which discourses become interwoven in ad interpretations. When we juxtapose the countervailing interpretive positions of the natural look and of the average woman, we obtain insight to the intricate workings of hegemonic accommodation in the arena of competing ad meanings. In a paradoxical sense, naturalization and problematization of fashion ads exist side by side. The unquestioned acceptance of one fashion look (or practice) usually implies the challenge of another one that is seen as contrived—and vice versa.

Discussion: Discourse and Interpreting Advertising

We add to a stream of advertising research that explores the theoretical link between text and con-

sumer (Scott 1994a, b; Stern 1989, 1993, 1994, 1996a) by incorporating a poststructuralist perspective on meaning construction through discursive appropriation (see Byars 1991; Foucault 1970, 1980; Hall 1997; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995), enhancing the ad communication model. The paradox of interpretation implies a socially and historically positioned subject-consumer who can construct webs of meaning of her own by shifting among different interpretive positions in the reading context and by understanding text and self in relation to various discourses. Consumers are the arbiters of meaning making, but simultaneously are subject to the limitations imposed by the (con)text and by relevant social and commercial discourses. We contend that the web metaphor suggests that people become immersed and entangled in webs of ideological meaning, implying the discursive constitution of the consumer subject (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995) and of negotiated ad meanings. Further, our revised framework is not inconsistent with deconstructive perspectives (see Stern 1996a, b): over time and space, sociocultural textual shifters alter ad meanings through mediating discourses. Thus, ad meaning is "slippery," dynamic, and constantly deferred, never achieving a timeless, transcendent status (Derrida 1982).

The revised ad model in Figure 1 constitutes a departure from conventional thought in that it is not an ad communication model; it is an ad *interpretation* model. We have attempted to problematize the interpreter/consumer and what s/he does with the text, enhancing the model with the critical element of discourse (cf. Stern 1994). Consumers do not "decode" ads with identifiable and unproblematic conventions and in the determined ways that marketers "intend" or might desire. Rather, consumers *interpret* ads and negotiate personalized meanings, albeit constituted by discursive, cultural viewpoints. They accept, reject, subvert, alter, and ignore ads in a multitude of ways, but within the constraints of historical and ideological context.

The advertising academic discipline has undergone an important paradigmatic shift during the last decade or so. The idea that advertising may be conceptualized as literary text (Stern 1989, 1996a) or as visual rhetoric (Scott 1994a) is becoming increasingly accepted. Recent contributions indicate a shift from ad communication models to ad meaning models (see Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994b). We urge researchers to broaden focus even further and incorporate our perspective, consolidating the new paradigm. For ex-

ample, many best-selling advertising textbooks targeted to undergraduate commerce and MBA students incorporate a version of that model (such as Arens 1996; Batra, Myers, and Aaker 1996; Belch and Belch 1998; O'Guinn, Allen and Semenik 1998). In the future, our students will be better served by incorporation of the collective contribution onto which our revised model builds.

Future Research

Advertising researchers have the opportunity to identify different kinds of nuanced interpretive strategies consumers use for different types of ads and ad contexts. We emphasize the chronological dimension of textual shifters and text-altering potentials, but future work may focus on changes in physical or cultural space and address a very important issue in international marketing. Employing our framework, we might ask: What meanings will an ad developed in Canada or the United States realize in Great Britain, Australia, or Israel? Further, given that postmodern North American society is fragmented into many ethnic groups, taste cultures, and subcultures (and other divisions), texts may be shifted by changing both temporal and cultural space.

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